

# CASKET EMPTY

## Part 1 – Creation

Genesis 2:4b-17

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ September 17, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

<sup>4</sup>In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, <sup>5</sup>when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; <sup>6</sup>but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— <sup>7</sup>then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. <sup>8</sup>And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. <sup>9</sup>Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

<sup>10</sup>A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches.

<sup>11</sup>The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; <sup>12</sup>and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. <sup>13</sup>The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. <sup>14</sup>The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

<sup>15</sup>The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. <sup>16</sup>And the Lord God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; <sup>17</sup>but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” (Genesis 2:4b-17, NRSV)

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My wife and son have read the Harry Potter books together and are now watching the movies. There are eight movies in the series and the other night they watched number seven. Having nothing to do that night, I decided to join them. Problem was, I haven't read the books and was confused from the start. My poor son, who drew the short straw and had to sit next to me during the movie, was annoyed from the start. I have no idea what a horcrux is! Neither do you if you haven't read the books. So all through the movie I'm

asking my son questions trying to understand the story that is unfolding before me on the screen. They are laughing at parts I don't find funny. The characters are reacting to circumstances in ways that make no sense to me. Parts that confuse me make perfect sense to my wife and son. Needless to say, I'm confident I won't be invited when they sit down to watch number eight.

You see, with a long, many-layered story like Harry Potter, it's very difficult to understand one part of the story without knowing the whole story and how each part of the story fits into context. The only way to do so it is to start at beginning, with, “Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much.” If you start from that point, everything forward will make sense.

Last weekend at our Fall Retreat, our speaker, Carol Kaminski, used a similar illustration to help us understand that the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, is also one long, multi-layered story broken up into many parts. But all the various characters and circumstances and writings are woven into one overarching redemptive narrative, the story of God's saving work in the world. That means that once you understand that overarching narrative then all the parts along the way fall into place.

Carol has developed an acronym, CASKET EMPTY, to help us visualize and remember the redemptive narrative of the Bible and we are going to follow up on her teaching last weekend by preaching through the letters of this acronym, one every week, for eleven weeks. I'll explain the meaning of the words as we go but for now here is what each letter signifies. The word CASKET outlines the story of the Old Testament, moving from Creation, to Abraham, to Sinai, to Kings, to Exile, to Temple. The word EMPTY then outlines the story as it continues in the New Testament, from Expectation, to Messiah, to Pentecost, to Teaching, and finally ending with Yet-to-Come. It's okay if many of these words don't make sense to you now because we'll take them up one at a time along the way.

As I've already said, if you really want to understand a story the only logical place to start is at the beginning, which is exactly what we are going to do today with the

Bible as we look at Creation. And the first line of the story, one you probably know by heart, actually tells us a great deal about the story that is to follow: **“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”**<sup>1</sup> Among other things, we learn here in the first few words that this is a story about God. The Bible isn’t about us, at least primarily. It’s the story of who God is, what God has done, and what God has promised to do. It’s vitally important that you remember this.

Now, we just read a section of the story that details how God created the heavens and the earth. In the opening verses of our text today we are given details about plants and herbs, rain and streams, details which at first may seem quite trivial. On closer examination, however, there is profound truth here. For one, we see here that God creates deliberately. The corn in the field and the thunderclouds in the sky are taking their cues from God and not allowed to enter the stage until it is their time to do so. In other words, the cosmos is not random or accidental. It all flows from the will and word of God, and is full of the intentionality and purpose of God.

And not just any god. The text is explicit, **“In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.”**<sup>2</sup> Written to a world that worships countless gods, these words proclaim that there is actually only one God who stands before and above creation, *the Lord God*. In the Hebrew that word for Lord is the personal name of God, a holy and unpronounceable name to the ancient Jews, which we have identified now as YHWH. That is to say, anybody reading the beginning of this story, then or now, ought to say, “Oh, I know who this is talking about! This isn’t some impersonal force behind the origins of the cosmos, this is the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Israel, the God of Moses who saved his people from Egypt, the God of David and Solomon, Isaiah and Jeremiah, the God who ultimately sent his son, Jesus Christ, to give his life for the world. I know who this is, this is the God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, the one who keeps steadfast love and forgiveness to the thousandth generation.”<sup>3</sup> I know who this is, this is the Lord!”

Very quickly on in the story we learn something very significant about the purposes the Lord has for creation. In verse 7 we read, **“Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”** You see, the Lord hasn’t just created the

world as his own personal vacation getaway spot, but as a home for the most important part of his creation, us. And this verse and others in the creation accounts of Genesis 1-2 make clear that humanity is unique among God’s creation in at least these three ways.

First, when God makes man he gets his hands dirty. With the rest of creation God simply speaks and planets, mountains, oceans, and elephants come into existence. It’s a demonstration of the power of God to will creation into existence. But God chooses a different way to create humanity. The word for “formed” in the Hebrew is the same word which was used to describe how a potter molds a lump of clay, literally “squeezing” it into shape. From the very beginning we see that there is an intimacy between God and humans that is distinct. We have God’s fingerprints all over us, like nothing else in creation.

Second, when God makes man he makes him dependent. The word for “man” in the Hebrew is the word *adam*; that’s where the first man gets his name. But that word for “man” comes from the Hebrew word for “ground”, which is *adama*. It’s a reminder that we are all made of dirt and, apart from the divine breath which the Lord infuses into our bodies, we would remain dirt. It is only because of the Lord that we have life.

Third, we’re told in the previous chapter of Genesis that humanity, unlike the rest of creation, is made in “the image” of God. Carol taught us last weekend that the word for image here is the same word that was used in the ancient world for idols, for these stone or wood statues that people made to worship. You see, people back then, just like today, loved idols because idols can’t tell you what to do. Since they can’t speak, or hear, or move, or relate to us in any way, we can speak to them but they can’t speak back to us.<sup>4</sup> Which keeps us in charge. In a way, then, our idols reflect us. They are *images* of who we are, carrying out our purposes in the world.

And now do you see what the Lord is teaching us here in Genesis? We are made in God’s image, made to reflect God in this world, even to represent God in this

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 115:2-6 declares:

“Why do the nations say,  
 ‘Where is their God?’  
 Our God is in heaven;  
 he does whatever pleases him.  
 But their idols are silver and gold,  
 made by human hands.  
 They have mouths, but cannot speak,  
 eyes, but cannot see.  
 They have ears, but cannot hear,  
 noses, but cannot smell.”

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:1

<sup>2</sup> Emphases mine.

<sup>3</sup> From Exodus 43:6-7

world, carrying out his purposes and living life on his terms. The difference, of course, is that we are not inanimate objects of wood and stone, but creatures made of living flesh and animated by the very breath of our Creator. Put simply, we are made to have a real and dynamic relationship with God, a relationship that is only distorted when we forget we are made in the Lord's image and meant to live life on his terms and turn, instead, to make gods in our image so that we can have them cooperate with us on our terms.

So, the Lord has made us distinct, formed us in intimacy by his very hands, created us dependent even for our very breath, and shaped us in his image to reflect and worship our Creator. Once created, then, the Lord takes man and sets him in his home. As a kid I had an aquarium and one of the most enjoyable parts for me was getting the aquarium prepared as a home for my fish. I had the neon colored rocks, the fake plastic seaweed, the little toy treasure chest on the bottom that would occasionally open and release bubbles. When it was finally ready and I brought the fish home from the pet store and released them in their new world, I always imagined that they were so impressed, even looking back at me through the glass with grateful googly eyes.

God made us a home, this world. Again, the text tells us, **“And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”** Even in this short description of the world the Lord made for us we learn a great deal about God's intentions for us in our new home. Let me highlight three things.

First, the Lord intended a life of abundance for us in this world. God didn't just plant trees for food but made the trees beautiful to look at and their fruit good for eating. Later in the text we hear God command the man to eat freely from nearly every tree in the garden. Abundant! Extravagant Generous!

I married a great cook when I married Esther. I'm not a great cook. I'm a fabulous dishwasher, so we make a great team. But my wife doesn't just get food on the table. Once in a while she'll pop in a frozen pizza, and there's nothing wrong with that. But when Esther prepares dinner there are always several items on the plate, each made from scratch and not out of a box. And they're not all one color, because variety is essential for her. No paper plates; we eat on dishes with a tablecloth and silverware and cloth napkins and often a glass of wine for those old enough to enjoy a glass of wine. She

doesn't just prepare food for people who are hungry; she makes a meal for people she loves.

On an infinitely grander scale, practicality and function wasn't the only thing on God's mind when he created our home. God made it beautiful, and plentiful, a feast for our senses in every way, exactly the way you would expect somebody to create a home for somebody they love.

Second, at the center of the abundance God places the Tree of Life and the man is told that he can eat from all these trees *including* the tree of life, an image that is used throughout the Bible to symbolize anything that enhances and celebrates life with God that never ends.<sup>5</sup> It's a symbol of all that is right and good in creation. In other words, humanity was created not just for abundance but for *eternal* abundance. This was God's intention from the very beginning.

Third, the man is not just set in the garden to enjoy a perpetual vacation. Sometimes that's our view of God's paradise, that it's a place for idyllic and uninterrupted bliss, nothing but hammocks, golf courses, and frozen drinks. Not so. Later in the text we're told, **“The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.”** Remember that part of what it means for us to have been made in God's image is that we were made to be God's royal representatives in this world, to carry out his purposes and share his intentions. God cares about this world, our home, and wants us to care about it as well. So we are put here to enjoy the world, yes, but also to nurture and protect the world, shaping it in the way God would want it to be shaped.

It's important, then, that you understand this picture. The Lord distinctly and intimately formed us by his own hands, created us dependent on his own breath, shaped us in his own image to reflect and worship him alone, and then set us in a home where everything was as it ought to be. Life for us as God intended it was richly abundant and eternal, and even deeply meaningful as we are called to join God in shaping creation for his purposes. This is the home for which we were made and isn't there something embedded deep in you that longs for this home? Considering the world as it is in its present state, the world we read about in Genesis 1-2 may seem utterly foreign to you. And yet, isn't there something in you that longs for the world you somehow know you were made for?

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Proverbs 11:30, 13:12, 15:4 and Revelation 2:7.

So what happened to that world and to us as a part of it? Well, in the next verses we learn that from the beginning God gave us a choice. For whenever there is a command, there is always a choice to obey or disobey that command. **“And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’”** This is not a suggestion, God saying, “Well, if I were you here’s what I’d do.” No, this is a command and a deathly serious one at that. Mostly it’s a command to enthusiastically enjoy the life God has given us. *Freely* eat from *every* tree in the garden. Except one. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil, don’t even touch that tree. Like the other trees it looks pleasing to the eye, but don’t be deceived. If you eat of it, you will most certainly die.

So what does this tree represent? A biblical scholar named Walter Brueggemann says, “God calls us to be his creatures and to live in this world *on his terms*.”<sup>6</sup> They are generous terms to be sure, but they are still his terms. The tree of knowledge reminds us, however, that we have a choice. We have been given moral autonomy. We have the freedom to choose life on God’s terms or ours, but we are commanded by our Creator to choose his terms. The Lord alone is the creator of all there is and so he not only knows how life in this world can be lived to its fullest eternal abundance but is, himself, *the very source* that life.

Notice – and this is crucial – that there is no reason given for the command. The Lord doesn’t go into a detailed explanation with Adam about why eating from this tree will lead to death. The command alone is all that is given, and if you’re a parent you know full well how difficult it can be for children to obey a command without knowing the reason.

When I was a kid I always wanted to know why. I have to be in by 10:00? Why? I have to eat my brussel sprouts? Why? I have to do my homework before I watch television? Why? Lots of rules my parents gave me made no sense to me at the time they were given and so I almost always asked for an explanation. Sometimes they did try to give me one but, to be honest, I don’t ever once remember saying in response to their explanations, “Well okay, Mom and Dad, that makes perfect sense. Thanks for explaining it to me. Now I’ll happily do what you ask.” Has any parent here ever succeeded in explaining the reasons for a rule so convincingly that your child gladly embraced the rule?

Here’s the point. From the very beginning God wants us to trust *him*, not the command. From Adam’s perspective the command made zero sense. Remember that *all the trees* looked pleasing to the eye, even the tree whose fruit carried seeds of death. What is expected here is trust, trust in the authority of the one who speaks to the extent that it leads to unqualified obedience. Put simply, we were not created as autonomous creatures who try to live life on our own terms as if we are gods, but we were created to be in relationship with the living Lord, the one true God, and to trust his commandments even when we don’t understand his commandments because his commandments lead to life. If we choose disobedience over obedience, autonomy over dependent trust, we inherit death because we cut ourselves off from the one who is the source of life.

But one might ask, why in the world did God set things up this way? Why even put such a deadly tree in the garden in the first place? God must have known what was going to happen!

There is no fully satisfying answer to that question, but C.S. Lewis gets close when he writes,

Why, then, did God give [humanity] free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata – of creatures that worked like machines – would hardly be worth creating. The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other in an ecstasy of love and delight compared with which the most rapturous love between a man and a woman on this earth is mere milk and water. And for that they’ve got to be free.<sup>7</sup>

There was no other way for the Lord to create us than to create us with the freedom to trust him or turn from him. And we all know, of course, what happened. Evil slipped into the garden in the form of a serpent and told lies about how the Lord was really a hoarding God of scarcity and that they would really do better for themselves if they set life on their own terms rather than his. And the lies were very, very convincing – they still are! – so convincing that Adam and his wife, Eve, decided that, yes, they would rather sit in the place of gods and live life on their own terms than trust the Word of the only one truly qualified to sit in that place.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, from the *Interpretation Commentary Series* (John Knox Press, 1982), 44. Emphases mine.

<sup>7</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Case for Christianity*, (B&H Publishing Group, 1943).

Of course, as they turned from the author and source of life they turned from life itself. Adam apart from the Lord is simply adama, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. This is why the word 'casket' is a good choice to describe the story of the Old Testament. We think Genesis, a word that means 'origins' is about the origins of the world, but that's only the first two chapters of the book. The rest of the book, along with the rest of the Old Testament, is about the origins of the mess that we in as a human family and how God is now at work redeeming that mess to bring us home. And by the way, the word 'adam' can be used to describe one man but is also often used to describe all of humanity, male and female. In other words, this is our story. It's not only Adam and Eve who choose to live lives on their own terms by rejecting God's Word to them, but all of us. Ashes to ashes and dust to dust, those are words that accurately describe the fate of every person in this room.

But all is not lost, for remember that this story isn't primarily about us. It's about the Lord, the one who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, the one who keeps steadfast love and forgiveness to the thousandth generation. You know who this is. This is the Lord! This is *his* story. And so even in its darkest chapters – and the fall of humanity into sin and death is one of the darkest – we see this true character of the Lord lingering on the edges.

Some of you know that in the following verses, after Adam and Eve eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, their eyes are opened and they immediately are overwhelmed by shame and run to hide from one another and from the Lord. But what does the Lord do in that moment? If in that moment God had walked in the other direction the story of humanity would have been over. But the Lord does not walk in the other direction but instead comes looking for his people. It's what God always does, never abandoning those who reject him but always chasing after us, even to the point of death. It's what the Lord does with you when you reject him in favor of life on your own terms. He doesn't walk away but comes looking for you wherever you are hiding in shame.

Now, when the Lord finds Adam and Eve he brings grim news of consequences. There's no way around it. Life apart from God is life apart from life, and the choice has been made. From that point on the human family is a mess. Relationships are cursed, even between those who are flesh and blood. Abundance evaporates in favor of scarcity. Pain is relentless. Nature is in upheaval. Injustice is rampant. Death is certain. And all of it can be traced, either directly or indirectly, to

human sin. The details of the curse God lists for Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 are devastating.

And yet, grace lingers on the fringes. Because not only has the Lord come looking for his people, the Lord has come with a plan. When he finds the man and the woman hiding naked and ashamed, the first thing the Lord does is take an innocent animal and kill it and take its skin to make garments for them both.<sup>8</sup> The man and woman are in need of a salvation that must come from the outside and so God does for them – that is, covers their shame - what they cannot do for themselves.<sup>9</sup> It's an act of utter grace that comes at a high price, at least for the innocent animal whose blood had to be shed for the sake of those who were not innocent. And perhaps it's not too much to suggest that even here we get a glimpse of God's plan, of what God would ultimately do one day when the blood of his own innocent Son was shed to do what we could never do for ourselves by covering our shame once and for all.

You see, even here at the very origins of human sin and death we see the origins of God's plan for redemption, a plan we will see take even more shape next week with the calling of a childless, old idol-worshiper named Abram. And as the story goes forward from the garden it's worth noting that the tree of knowledge of good and evil is never again mentioned in scripture. But the tree of life, that tree is not forgotten. In fact, it appears even in final pages of the story, the pages which describe the ultimate fulfillment of God's redemptive plan to bring us back home to where we started.<sup>10</sup> In this there is great hope, even at the darkest hour.

Amen.

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## The Next Step

### *A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read the text from Genesis 2:4b-17 again. What do you notice first in this passage?
2. Is 'casket' a good word to use to capture the essence of the Old Testament? If not, what word would you choose instead?

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 3:21

<sup>9</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17* (Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 206.

<sup>10</sup> Read Revelation 22:1-5

3. How would you describe God as portrayed in the Old Testament? Does this passage from Genesis 2 line up with your description?
4. According to the text here, what is unique about the way God created humanity? What does it all mean?
5. The Lord puts two trees in the garden, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Why would God put *both* trees there instead of just the tree of life?
6. Why does eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil lead to certain death?
7. When God gives you a command in his Word are you able to trust God and obey that command no matter what it is, even if you don't completely understand the command? Why or why not?
8. Where is there grace in this story? How does the story portray God as one who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness?

**Table to Table Question**

***A question for kids and adults to answer together***

Think about the way God creates Adam in this story. What is the most surprising thing about it?  
What is the most beautiful thing about it?